

## The Third Sunday of Advent

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 35:1-6A, 10
<i>Response</i>	He will come and save you
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 146:6-7, 8-9, 9-10
<i>Second Reading</i>	James 5:7-10
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 11:2-11

The second reading on the Third Sunday of Advent is not taken from a letter of Paul, it's actually taken from the letter of James, which is one of my favorite letters in the New Testament. It's also a bit different than Paul's letters, because it's written (most scholars think) primarily to a Jewish Christian audience. And in this case, the Church takes a selection from the end of James' letter, where he is writing to his congregation to encourage them to be patient with regard to the coming of the Lord, with regard to the second coming of Christ, the *parousia*.

And even as I say that, you can understand why the Church might give us this passage in the third week of Advent...because we are waiting. We've been waiting now, and we're preparing ourselves to celebrate the *parousia*, the coming of Christ at Christmas in the feast of Christmas. So with that background in mind, let's see what James has to say to us. And we'll try to explain it in its original context and then also draw out its meaning for us today, especially in the season of Advent. So James 5:7-10 says this:

Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it until it receives the early and the late rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble, brethren, against one another, that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is

standing at the doors. As an example of suffering and patience, brethren, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.<sup>1</sup>

Okay, so a number of things we can highlight here from this particular passage. So the first thing we want to highlight here is the word patience. When James exhorts his audience to be patient, he's using the Greek word *makrothymeō*, and it can be defined as following: it's a state of remaining tranquil while awaiting an outcome. So kind of like peace of soul, remaining tranquil while you wait for something to come through.

In fact, this particular term is actually very important outside of the letter of James, because it's the same word that Paul uses in his famous chapter on love, 1 Corinthians 13. Whenever Paul defines Christian love, agape, the very first attribute of love that Paul mentions is *makrothymeō* or patience. So when Paul says, 1 Corinthians 13:4-5:

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude.

That first word, agape, is *makrothymeō*. Agape is patient. So it's a very profound and powerful insight into the nature of both love and patience—that those two things go together so much that Paul would list that as one of the first attributes of Christian love, of agape.

In any case, in this case James here is talking not about agape so much as the kind of tranquility necessary for Christians as they await the coming of the Lord. And that Greek word there for coming is *parousia*. It literally means “presence,” but by the first century AD, it was used to refer to the presence of someone who is coming to you. Like the approach of a king or an emperor to a city could actually be called his *parousia*. He would be drawing near, he would be approaching. And when he arrived, obviously, he would be present. But you would actually speak of his coming as his presence, his *parousia*. So whenever you see the term *parousia* in

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

the New Testament, it's usually translated as "coming." And then in Latin, it's going to be translated as *adventus*. So there's your first clue as to why this passage is given to us on the third Sunday of Advent, because it explicitly mentions the advent of the Lord. And James is encouraging his audience—he's exhorting them, I should say—to be patient as they wait for the *parousia* of Jesus Christ.

Now, you might think, well, wait...why should they need to be patient about that? Well, remember, if you go back to the Gospels, and you look at Jesus' own teachings about the coming of the Son of man on the clouds of Heaven or the coming of the kingdom of God, Jesus says over and over again, "Repent, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. It is near." He says that the coming of the Son of man is near. Right before the Transfiguration, He says to the apostles, "There are some standing here who will not taste death"—until they see the Son of man in glory.

So part of the apostolic preaching that goes back to Jesus, is the teaching on the imminence of His *parousia*, of the nearness or the imminence of the second coming—that Jesus' coming is close, that it is at hand. So one of the first difficulties the early Church experienced in the first generation was what scholars sometimes refer to as the "delay" of the *parousia*. In other words, if Jesus is coming near, why hasn't He come yet? And you can see various examples of this in the New Testament.

So for example, at the end of the Gospel of John, Jesus says to Peter when Peter asks Him, hey, what about the beloved disciple? Jesus says, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?" And so John actually tells us, the Gospel says, that the rumor started to spread that the beloved disciple would not die until Jesus had come back, until His second coming...or before the second coming. But he qualifies that Jesus didn't say that. All He said was, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you, Peter? You follow me."

So you can see there was coupled with the proclamation of the nearness of the kingdom of God and the imminent coming of the Son of Man, the expectation that it would be within their own lifetime, or that there would be within the lives of the Apostles. So as the Gospel's spreading and the years start to pass, one of the things

that happened is some people become impatient about the (so to speak) Christological clock...or the eschatological clock. You know, time is ticking here, when is Jesus coming back? He said He was coming soon. The Apostles say He's coming soon. So how do we explain this apparent delay?

And so James here, much like Paul in his letter, not only speaks about the nearness of the *parousia*, but he also exhorts his audience to be patient, to wait for it. So he gives here two examples of the kind of patience he's talking about. The first one is the patience of the farmer. James — by the way James loves to do this. He loves to give examples to illustrate his teaching. So Paul will frequently use these complex metaphors, and he'll mix metaphors, or he'll give theological exegesis of Old Testament Scriptures.

That's not how James is. In the letter of James, he likes to use concrete examples—a lot of them taken from daily life—to illustrate his point. And so in this case—and he likes to give multiple examples too—so in this case, he gives two examples. The first example is the example of a farmer who:

waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it until it receives the early and the late rain. (James 5:7b)

Now, I'm a professor. I'm not a farmer, obviously, but if you've engaged in farming or even if you just had a garden or planted a tree in your yard, you'll know that whenever you engage with anything agricultural, or if you plant anything, it demands an extraordinary amount of patience, right? You don't get fruit in a day from a tree. In fact, sometimes you don't even get it for several years. So the farmer here has a natural rhythm to his life that includes the virtue of learning how to plant a seed, feed it, water it, fertilize it, and then wait patiently...being tranquil, as we pointed out, the state of remaining tranquil while awaiting some outcome. If you're an impatient farmer and you try to rush things, you're just going to end up frustrated, because planting and harvesting takes time.

And you can see here, notice when James says “the early and the late rain,” he's talking about spring rains and autumn rains. Okay, so the farmer can wait a whole year before they get their harvest. This stands in stark contrast to contemporary

society where everything is instant, right? Instant gratification. We're so used to that in modernity that we've become very unaccustomed to the kind of patience that living in the ancient world or living in an agricultural society in the first century AD would have required.

So James may even be addressing—some of his Christians may be farmers, for all we know. He's saying, look, if you can wait, if you can have patience to wait for the harvest to come, then you should also be able to be patient when it comes to the coming of the Lord. So that's the first example. In light of that example, he says,

You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. (James 5:8)

So a second example here, notice, is very similar to what we hear from Paul. When he says “establish your hearts,” it's actually an unusual expression. But the Greek word there means to fix firmly. You can think of like putting a stake in the ground—would be to establish it. So he's calling them not just to patience but to being solid, to enduring as they wait for the coming of the Lord. And in that context, he not only discusses the virtue of patience, he also discusses some vices. Notice here what he says:

Do not grumble, brethren, against one another, that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the doors. (James 5:9)

Why does James talk about grumbling here? Well, basically because complaining or grumbling is the opposite of patience. Because remember, as we said, the Greek word *makrothymeō* means to wait in tranquility, to be peacefully waiting for some outcome that's going to take time. As a general rule, people who are complaining or grumbling are often complaining and grumbling because they haven't gotten what they want in the way that they want it. In other words, they're frequently impatient. And if you read through the Bible, you will notice...yes, God does not like idolatry. He does not like blasphemy. He does not like adultery. We tend to be clear on those. But if you want to know something He really hates? He hates complaining.

Go back to the Old Testament. The Israelites in the desert—they get into a lot of trouble just because they’re grumbling, because they’re complaining against God, because they lack the virtue of patience...of patiently waiting for the long journey that He’s going to bring them on through the desert and trusting God that He’s going to lead them home to the Promised Land.

So as a basic rule, people who complain a lot have zero patience. They’re not tranquil; they’re agitated, precisely because they don’t know how to wait in tranquility for the things that they don’t yet possess. So James here uses his exhortation to patience to remind them that they should not grumble against one another, because if they do, they will be judged. And this should make you think of Jesus’ famous teaching in Matthew 7:1:

Judge not, that you be not judged. (Matthew 7:1)

Very famous chapter from the Sermon on the Mount—probably the most popular of all Jesus’ sayings in the New Testament today, because it works well in, or it plays well in a relativistic context. Judge not lest you be judged. But Jesus isn’t saying that we can never make any moral judgments. What He’s talking about is condemning other people. Putting oneself in the place of God is a dangerous thing to do. So in Matthew 7:1 it says:

“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye?”

It’s really kind of funny, actually. Imagine somebody with a log in their eye trying to get a speck out of another person’s eye.

You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye. (Matthew 7:1-5)

So what we're seeing here is something that's actually going to be common in James, whenever we read from James. He will frequently allude to the teachings of Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, but without quoting them directly. So he's expecting his congregation to be familiar, that when he says, "You may not be judged," it's like an echo of Jesus' teaching. So notice there that Jesus is describing the vice not just of complaining but of pride—a kind of spiritual pride whereby a person sees very clearly the faults of their neighbor (even their most minimal faults, like a speck), but they're blind to their own fault. They're blind to their own sins. It's like having a log in your eye and yet focusing on a speck in someone else's eye.

And again, just as a general rule, it's not a coincidence here that James connects grumbling and judging someone else, because judging someone else—what Jesus is describing here is basically the sin of pride, of spiritual pride in particular, the sin of arrogance. If you've ever met anyone who tends to complain a lot about other people and judge other people—as a rule, they're often pretty arrogant, they're often very prideful. In other words, pride and complaining go together, both with regard to judging other people, but—here's the kicker—also with regard to judging God.

Think about it. If a person...if the people in James' audience are complaining that the *parousia* has not yet happened, what are they in effect saying? That Jesus needs to come back on my timeline rather than the Father's timeline. Now that's a very arrogant thing to say, to assume that we know best when the *parousia* of the Lord should take place. So what James is doing here is he's calling, effectively calling his audience to be humble in the face of the apparent delay of the *parousia* and to use the opportunity to grow in the virtue of patience as they wait for the coming of the Lord—and not to let it become an opportunity for grumbling and complaining about one another, because just as he says "the coming of the Lord is near," so too he says "the Judge is standing at the doors." In other words, you will be judged, and it will be sooner rather than later.

And then the final thing he does in this passage is interesting. He gives a second example. And this example is not taken from ordinary life or the life of the farms and field. It's actually taken from the Scriptures. So he'll often do this as well in

his letter. He'll take one example from daily life and then another example from the Bible. And so the second example he gives here of patience is that of the prophets. So he says:

As an example of suffering and patience, brethren, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. (James 5:10)

Now, why are the prophets an example of patience? Two key reasons. First, the vast majority of them never saw their prophecies come to fulfillment. That's the first thing. So think about Isaiah, all those prophecies of the suffering servant...or Ezekiel's prophecies of the new temple...or Jeremiah's prophecies of the coming Messiah and the ingathering of the twelve tribes of Israel. They all died before any of those things ever came to pass. And actually, not only did they die, but according to ancient Jewish tradition (which James is probably assuming here, because he's writing to Jewish Christians), they were all martyred. So Jeremiah was, according to tradition, Jeremiah was stoned to death by his own people. And according to tradition, Isaiah the prophet was sawn in half while he was alive by King Manasseh. Alright, so he was cut in half and put to death.

So, if I were Isaiah or I were Jeremiah, and I ended my life that way—executed at the hands of my own people or the hands of my own king—and not seeing any of my prophecies come to fulfillment, I might be tempted to complain. And yet, what does James say? The prophets didn't complain. They suffered in tranquility as they awaited the hope, as they awaited the fulfillment of prophecies of the Word of the Lord, which they themselves would not see come to pass.

Also, too, when it came to the actual fulfillment, think about this: sometimes those prophecies took centuries, or in the case of for example, Nathan's prophecy to David, a millennium. A thousand years went by between Nathan telling David a king would come from his own offspring, whose throne will be established forever in the coming of Jesus Christ. So a millennium went by. So what James is doing is he's just drawing on the fact that if the prophets of the Old Testament could wait their entire lifetime and then even beyond their lifetime—centuries and even a millennium—for the fulfillment of their prophecies to take place, then how much more should we Christians be patient as we wait for the fulfillment of the



prophecies of Jesus about His *parousia*, about His second coming, and about the final judgment that will take place at His second Advent, His final Advent?

Okay, so with that said, just a couple of points from the living tradition. What can we draw from this passage? How has it been interpreted in the tradition, and then what might it mean to our spiritual lives today?

In this case, I have another commentary that I highly recommend, another one of my favorite saints, St. Bede the Venerable. He's not a very popular guy, but he is actually a Doctor of the Church. He lived in the late 7th, early 8th century in England. So it wasn't called England back then...it was North Umbria, is what it was called. But he's one of the saints that hailed from the English Isle. And he had a commentary that he wrote on all the Catholic epistles. And in his *Commentary on James*, this is what Bede says about today's reading for the third Sunday of Advent:

If [the farmer] labors so patiently for the fruit of the land which he waits for and hopes in time will come forth, how much more ought you to hold up under all adversities now for the fruit of the heavenly reward which you can possess forever? For indeed you will receive the fruit in time, the life, namely of the soul after death; you will also receive later on at the judgment the incorruption of your flesh, or at least the early in the works of righteousness, the late in the reward of your labors according to the saying of the apostle, "You have your fruit in sanctification, the end, in fact, eternal life" (Romans 6:22).<sup>2</sup>

That's Bede's *Commentary on James*, 5:7. So in effect, what Bede is saying here is this: Look, if you can be patient with regard to earthly things, like farming and the harvest, then how much more should you patiently strive after the fruit of righteousness and eternal life, both in heaven (after death), but also ultimately in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come?

---

<sup>2</sup> Bede the Venerable, *Commentary on James* 5:7; trans. D. Hurst

And I think that's a really good lesson for us to remember, that sometimes we learn how to be patient about certain earthly things that take time to bear fruit. But when it comes to our prayers, when it comes to heavenly things that we're asking of God, we can get really impatient really quickly when He doesn't immediately answer our prayers or bring things to pass that we've asked Him to do. So, cultivation of humility there in spiritual matters as well as earthly matters from St. Bede the Venerable.

Finally, I'd like to quote from another book, St. Francis de Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life*. You might be thinking this whole time, "Dr. Pitre, I just don't have patience." Or maybe you're thinking, "Will this video wrap up?" Maybe you're impatient for this video to be done. If either one of those is your reaction or something you struggle with, I can't recommend highly enough St. Francis' treatment of patience in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*. So he's not actually commenting on this passage from James, but he is discussing the same virtue. So I'd like you to hear what St. Francis de Sales says about the virtue of patience:

Do not limit your patience to this or that kind of injury and affliction. Extend it universally to all those God will send you or let happen to you... Complain as little as possible about the wrongs you suffer. Undoubtedly a person who complains commits a sin by doing so, since self-love always feels the injuries worse than they really are. Above all, do not complain to irascible or fault-finding persons.

Irascible means like irritable, angry people.

If there is just occasion for complaining to someone either to correct an offense or restore your peace of mind, do so to those who are even-tempered and really love God. Instead of calming your mind the others will stir up worse difficulties and in place of pulling out the thorn that is hurting you they will drive it deeper into your foot.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 3.3; trans. J. K. Ryan

St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, book 3, paragraph 3. That is really good advice. So if you are inclined not just to impatience but to the sin—notice that—of complaining, Francis de Sales gives us some good advice. Be patient with every kind of affliction you endure. In other words, sometimes we can be patient with certain things but not with other things, like we're selectively patient. Francis says, "Be patient with everything"—extend it to everything that happens to you.

Second, in the face of it, complain as little as possible. In other words, avoid the habit of complaining. It's a bad habit; it's a sinful habit. And especially, he says, if you're going to complain, if there's a need to right a wrong or to regain peace of soul, don't do it with someone who's going to exaggerate and exacerbate the anger—or whatever emotion you might be feeling—that's generating the complaint. Do it to somebody who actually loves God and who will help you see the trial or difficulty through the lens of the Christian virtue of patience, through the lens of somebody who is waiting on God to come through and to deliver you from whatever trial or tribulation it might be.

So I don't know about you, but I think that's good advice. Going all the way back to St. James, be patient and don't complain. And for both of those things, those would be great messages for us to listen to in this season of Advent, as we await the coming of Jesus Christ at a time that's often very busy and frenetic. To take a moment to pause, to be grateful and to be thankful for the great gift of the birth of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, that we don't have to wait for anymore. He's already come in His nativity. The prophets had to wait for centuries for that to happen. Well, it's happened. So instead of having a spirit of impatience and complaining, let us be both patient for His second coming, but also grateful for the gift that has come to us in Jesus Christ this Christmas.